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AUTHOR Price, Joseph P.
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ABSTRACT

The author identifies three school practices which discriminate against Black children and proposes three measures school systems can take toward a more equitable learning experience. The following negative practices are discussed: overenrollment of Black children in special education classes for the emotionally disturbed, the disproportionate suspension of Black students from school, and the unrealistic expectations that teachers seem to be developing for poor Black children. Recommended are a commitment to the process of collaboration among local, state, and national organizations concerned with the welfare of Black children; articulation of goal statements by relevant organizations coupled with advocacy so that goals are encompassed in state and federal laws and in school policies; and promotion and implementation of a comprehensive monitoring system to assure that laws and policies are being fully complied with. Appended is a list of six resource organizations. (DB)

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Select Issues in Educational Services for Behavioral Disordered Black Youth

Joseph P. Price

Michigan State University

Position Paper of the Council for Behavioral Disorders. Presented at the Council for Exceptional Children, Conference on the Exceptional Black Child, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 15-17, 1981

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It is very gratifying for me to be a participant in today's program, to be a representative of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, and to witness the large number of people from around the country who are concerned about the education of exceptional black children. One of the areas of greatest concern to me is the inappropriate educational services provided to black students displaying social behavior problems. In spite of the philosophical commitment of school personnel to an appropriate education for all children (with guarantees embedded in federal law), many minority children appear to be ill served by current school practices. Three of the more spurious school practices that I would like to describe for purposes of illustration are:

1) the over-enrollment of black children in special education classes for the emotionally disturbed, 2) the disproportionate suspension of black students from school, and 3) the unrealistic expectations that teachers seem to be developing for poor black children. Lets take a few minutes to clarify the nature and the implications of these problems, and then proceed to identify several measures that can be taken to improve the quality of educational services to our young people.

For more than two decades, parents of black children, along with other concerned adults have questioned the large number of black students enrolled in special education programs, particularly programs designed for emotionally disturbed youngsters. While school officials frequently denied the reality and avoided the implications of over-representation of black students, evidence is now abundant and clear that black children do comprise a larger segment of the special education population than would be predicted on theoretical grounds (U.S.O.C.R., 1980). That is, the number of minority students enrolled in special education programs is expected to approximate the number of minority students in a district.

How do these figures compare when we examine the enrollment patterns in select communities? Consider the case of the Los Angeles Unified School District, During the 1978-79 academic year, black students comprised 25 percent of the total enrollment; but represented 40 percent of the severely emotionally disturbed (SED) group and 33 percent of the socially maladjusted (SMAL) group. During this same period in New York City, black students reflected 39 percent of the total enrollment, but 55 percent of the severely emotionally disturbed, and 56 percent of the socially maladjusted enrollments. Even more blatant are the figures for Kentucky's Fayette County School System. In this district, black students accounted for only 19 percent of the total school enrollment, while they represented 41 percent of the severely emotionally disturbed, and 42 percent of the socially maladjusted. The obvious commonality among these illustrations is the fact that black student enrollment for the behavioral disordered is far in excess of the enrollment pattern we would predict, based on theoretical projections. As the figures of over representation continue to mount, many black students are responding to these placement decisions by developing feelings of rejection, anxiety, frustration and hostility, which have been described in the professional literature for many years (Goldstein, Arkell, Ashcroft, Hurley and Lilly, 1975). Before discussing some of the strategies that can be taken to alter this insidious practice, let us review another body of data that also has serious implications for the black community, and is of great concern to CCBD. It is the data which describes the vastly disproportionate number of black students recently suspended from public schools.

Access to a meaningful education is considered to be a fundamental right of all American children and is essential to the economic mobility of black

youngsters in particular. In spite of this cherished right, which is protected by federal and state legislation, an astonishing number of black students are suspended from school each year, without assurance of a comproble educational program during the suspension period. A quick examination of the dramatically contrasting figures associated with a few school districts will give you an immediate appreciation of the problem. In 1978, while black students constituted 24 percent of Omaha's public school enrollment, they also comprised 44 percent of all suspended students. In the Dekalb County School System (Georgia), 26 percent of the students enrolled were black; yet 49 percent of those suspended were black. In Florida's Escambia County School District, 28 percent of the district enrollment was black; however, 50 percent of the suspension group was black. As you reflect on the vast discrepancies among these figures and also consider that the overwhelming majority of school suspensions (63 percent) were for non-dangerous offenses (Children's Defense Fund, 1975), I am confident you share my feelings when I state that this practice warrents our immediate attention.

A third area of significance to me is the unusually high, perhaps unrealistically high expectations that some school personnel seem to have for lower class black children. Of course I realize that parents have traditionally complained about teacher's expectations being far too low, and thereby failing to encourage black students to achieve their full learning potential. However, it now appears that a segment of the school community perceives lower class black students are capable of achieving goals beyond those of students on other socio-edonomic levels. This perception is reflected in a number of recent studies, including one conducted by Hendren and Routh (1978). These investigators found that psychologists considered middle class children more likely to need special education services than lower class children. Roger Frame (1979), in his study concerned with the bias effects of race and socio-economic status on

psychologists' recommendations noted that lower class black children tended to be diagnosed as "Not Eligible for Special Education" more often than the white children and the upper class black children. Equally provocative is the outcome of a research project by Giesbrecht (1979), in which teachers predicted far better progress in reading at the end of a three year period for black children of parents with low levels of education than they predicted for children of well educated parents.

Obviously these studies are far from definitive in their singular or combined value, yet they do raise questions of: 1) Whether or not some school personnel are over compensating for the inequities experienced by poor black children in the past? 2) What are the consequences of this expectation on the academic performance and self concept of poor black students?

Given the magnitude and pervasiveness of the various problems just described, is there anything that we can do to effect a meaningful change in the near future? There <u>are</u> several measures, I feel, that can contribute to a more equitable and a more viable learning experience for young people <u>if</u> we are willing to invest the time and energy. First, there must be a commitment to the process of collaboration among local, state and national organizations concerned with the welfare of black children (examples are included in Appendix A). Secondly, goal statements articulated by organizations should be developed, and advocated in a manner that will permit them to be readily encompassed in state or federal laws and in school policies. Thirdly, we must promote and exercise a comprehensive monitoring system to assure that laws and policies are being fully implimented.

To illustrate how these strategies may work when dealing with a tangible problem, such as over-enrollment or suspension of black students, you and I could check with our respective state department of education or regional U.S.

Office of Civil Rights to determine if black students are over-represented in our local communities. If they are, then you and I, working in conjunction with several other well developed organizations could induce our respective state or federal compliance office to obey the law (P.L. 94-142) by taking appropriate corrective action to eliminate the imbalance.

Please note that I am not recommending that we function in a manner which creates an adversary relationship with school authorities. It seems evident to me that school personnel need our help desperately. The excessive number of behavioral disordered enrollments and suspensions of black students signifies a lack of competence in the area of behavior management. This impression is supported by studies in which teachers clearly identify the need, and desire for additional training in behavior management (Price and Cook, 1978). In view of these deficits, there are a variety of activities in which all of us can participate that will lead to a marked reduction in the number of student behavirol problems. They include:

1) Advocating that more training opportunities be made available to inservice personnel

2) Developing a model discipline code for the school in your community, preferably one for each level, e.g., primary, middle and high school.

3) Designing and implementing training programs for the entire staff and student body.

4) Including school principal, key neighborhood and youth leaders in the training program.

5) Sharing your knowledge of recent research, such as the influence of social class, race and teacher expectations on the educational judgements rendered by teachers.

6) Encouraging the extensive use of literature that may enhance program

options, e.g., models and materials from national dissemination networks.

I would like to think that with your continued concern and commitment, we can make the schools a place where young black children can explore their interest, develop their talents and feel good about themselves during the process.

Thank you.

Reference Notes

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APPENDIX A

Resource Organizations

Resource Organizations

1. Center for Law and Education Inc.
   6 Appian Way,
   Cambridge, Mass 02138
   (617) 495-4666

2. Children's Defence Fund
   1520 New Hampshire Avenue N.W.
   Washington D.C. 20036

3. National Advisory Council on Bilingual Education
   c/o Dr. Gloria Becerra, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, Reporters Building, Room 421
   400 Maryland Avenue S.W.
   Washington D.C. 20202
   (202) 447-9227

4. National Advisory Council on Education of Disadvantaged Children
   425 13th St. N.W. Suite 1012
   Washington D.C. 20004

5. National Advisory Council on Equality of Educational Opportunity
   1325 G. Street, N.W.
   Washington, D.C. 20005
   (202) 724-0221

6. National Advisory Council on Indian Education
   425 13th Street, N.W. Suite 326
   Washington, D.C. 20004
   (202) 376-8882